ruffage

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Ruffage

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EDITORS
Patrick Geissel '95
Rudolph Weitz '94
Joy Yarusi '94

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Prose

when I pointed out the above socio-economic, et cetera, factors out? I had assembled this information mentally while waiting to be admitted to the examination room, and the more such data that could be dug out regarding this accident, the more could be funneled into accident prevention—a most necessary science.

Whoever had created those strips simply needed to realize that a person, because of a misplaced strip, would one afternoon fall and hurt their knee. Once this was clear, I felt it was the duty of the company to consider changes in their manufacturing procedures to make the things safer. This train of reasoning was logical, I thought—but I was convinced that no one would listen.

If I mentioned it to the receptionist or the doctor, they would think I was exaggerating, gone loopy and faint from the fall. But I had recovered by now. Oh, yes. I was feeling quite sane.

If nothing else, the matter could be reduced to economics, I thought. My mind was churning . . . Blue Cross Blue Shield, which was now financially responsible for the cost of my injury, would not be happy to have to pay most of this bill. Any expenditure was an unfathomable ill.

The receptionist did not want to hear any of the attitudes I had been forming. She, clad in grisly shining white, battered me with a number of relevant questions: the name of my insurance company, my social security number, and date of birth.

In the doctor's room, my blood stunk strong like I suddenly knew a poultry farm must stink after a mass execution of dinner poultry. Every living being is a devourer of souls and bodies. It is not just plastic or inanimate things, I knew. I could not fathom this condition, even with all the facts straight. Analogies to lower beasts sprung naturally to my mind now. When a chicken gets hurt, the fundamental damage it that which happens to the so-called soul. The body, if it only were injured, could be dealt with. But, in physical injury, the illusion of soul was broken. It was a fact doctors had apparently been trying to hide! The fact is, doctors are squeamish about life.

Humans regarded chickens as fundamentally different from themselves. If humans ever regarded chickens as susceptible to soul-violation, humans would never victimize chickens physically. But chickens were valued by humans because their bodies could be pummeled out of existence: it was unapologetically primitive.

I lay on the operating table waiting for my stitches to be stitched through the pounded flesh. The doctor who would arrive shortly, would soon be radically chewing on a part of my soul. He could not help it, there was no tacking around it. His instruments were clumsy. Fiddling with my skin, he would acknowledge in effect that me as self, did not exist. The emergency room smelled of my blood, and I was death. No one would contradict me, because they were all death, too. My doctor would be a luminous body, an entity not in control of itself.

When the doctor sewed me, he would be sewing my soul. He would be trying to stitch my consciousness together again, with black thread.

Every day now, after being stitched, I think to myself, what can be done about lips. They are my constant persecutors, but the whole thing's helpless. The lips, I—there is no difference now. That which we call words, we should maybe call blood. The words are evidence of a falling-away of things. Their illusion of wholeness is deceit. Words fly around those who are, for a moment, mystically whole. This illusion: who knows why we maintain it.

Even when lips seem whole, they are on the verge of destruction. The way our hair grows, the way we walk—these, too, are arbitrary. I cannot move my mouth to bear witness to things. My mouth is the situation, caved in on itself. I can't move anything of myself. Each night, to get into my bed, I pick up my right leg with both arms, placing it delicately beneath the sheets. I, picking up that which they call "myself": it is a strange effect. ❖

The Massacre

Jodie Clark

Marla and Sally each rode dirt bikes down Jackson Terrace — a street of houses and yards of a small uniform size. Sometimes they took this route walking and noticed the pains their neighbors had taken to differentiate themselves, usually in the form of lawn ornaments: reflective blue spheres on concrete pedestals, a wooden statue of St. Francis in a flower bed, plaster squirrels which seemed to scurry up the front of a house. But now, on their bikes, they sped down the long road so that the fronts of the houses formed a comfortable bluish-gray wall. Ahead of them, the large white Catholic Church loomed, its appearance not blurring, but getting bigger and more detailed with each pedal. As they neared the end of Jackson, they tried to preview the cars on Garfield, the crossroad. They never stopped at the stop sign when they rode their bikes. They sped up so that they could jump the broad ditch separating the sprawling cemetery behind the church from the road. Marla always closed her eyes.

They made it. Marla, opening her eyes and wobbling, was momentarily triumphant — then she saw that Sally was ahead by a few bike lengths. They both had to slow down as they made their way through the wet cemetery lawn. The tombstones were gray, some covered partially with green moss, and old. A few had fallen over off their bases, others had cracked and fallen.

"Look at that one," said Sally, pointing out a large gravestone recently blown over.

"Yeah," said Marla, breathless, ignoring it.

They headed for the left, toward the parking lot behind the church. They glided swiftly across the large parking lot, then carefully and much more slowly, they went through the little woods on the other side of the church. When they had made it through the woods, they stopped and leaned their bicycles against trees. They looked down into a valley — their whole neighborhood had been built on a hill of sorts, more of a plateau. The field which they watched now was open and wild with flowers and weeds. It looked shaped in the earth like a bowl, or the bottom half of an Easter egg. The children looked only for a minute. "Let's *go,* " said Marla, so they made their way matter-of-factly down to the field; deftly, like Mrs. McNary's plaster likenesses of squirrels climbing the mustard-yellow front of her house.

The sun was overhead, and hot. Marla, out of breath and sweating, pulled wet pieces of beige-colored hair out of her mouth before making more stumbling, itchy steps down the hill. In this part of the field, goldenrod abounded, and the stalks scratched at her already bruised, brown legs. She had more scratches on her sockless ankles from low-growing prickles, and her arms were covered with mosquito bites in various stages. Some she had scratched until they bled; these had scars. She squinted brown eyes from the sun. She drew her thin lips inward, finishing her descent.

Sally had similar summer markings, though she was smaller, whiter, and freckled. She still had a bruise above her eye from when she had fallen off her dirt bike a week ago. Her orange hair was in pony-tails on the side of her head. They both wore cut-offs and T-shirts. They both carried backpacks. They were both eleven years old.

Suddenly they were standing in the middle of the field, looking around. Behind them, distant but imposing, was the Catholic Church, in front of them, Mr. Murphy's farm with

its ominous electric wire fence. To the left was the highway, to the right more woods, and behind the woods (they knew) more of Spring Hill, their neighborhood.

On these trips to the flower field, they never much looked at their surroundings. Now they got to work right away, pulling baby food jars out of their backpacks. The trips to the flower field were standard parts of their summer days, the baby food jars were not. Two days ago Sally told Marla about an article her sister had read in a National Geographic. An entomologist was made famous for identifying ants as members of a never-before-known species. She had received the ants from her neice, who had seen them while she was visiting in Australia, and finding them interesting, returned them to her aunt in the U.S. The niece had received considerable recognition in the article. Soon after Marla asked her sixteen-year-old brother Stephen how to kill a bug without smashing it.

"You use a killing jar," he explained. He had collected insects for his Biology class. "Little jars with things on the inside of the lid filled with chemicals. Or you could just use fingernail polish remover — you put it on cotton balls."

The next day Marla sneaked her mother's fingernail polish remover from the bathroom cabinet and Sally took a bag full of cotton balls from her sister's drawer. The baby food jars had been carefully saved in the garage by Sally's father, who planned on using them for nails and screws. Sally had taken only six, though they planned on collecting a lot of insects each, "because you can fit more than one bug in a jar," she explained. Neither of them could find a butterfly net. They would have liked to have had a butterfly net.

"So," said Sally. "Alright."

Marla looked at her.

"So how do we get these bugs again?" Sally continued.

"Just find 'em. And put 'em in the jars. Then we put the cotton balls in."

"How do I get them in the jars?"

"I dunno, if you see a bug on a leaf or something, you could put the whole leaf in a jar. Or whatever, let's just *do* it."

The flowers were tall and sturdy, ragged and insect-eaten. Onlookers from cars on the highway often described the field as beautiful, but up close the flowers were tough and worn. Some were roughly half as tall as the two girls, the others mainly came up to their knees, except those that crawled along the ground. The prospect of bug-hunting here seemed promising.

Marla turned her back on Sally and turned to face the woods. She stooped down to examine the leaves of the flowers, finding only an ordinary black beetle, but you never knew, maybe something distinguished it from the rest. The way she saw it, the more bugs they collected, the more likely they'd get famous. She quickly brushed it from its furry-leaf perch into her open jar, then covered the jar. She screwed the cap on, tight. She kept looking. She found a flat bug with orange on its back, easily captured, and a brown cricket that was more difficult. She caught it in her hands before depositing it in the jar. She turned around to look at Sally.

Sally had alighted after a sky-colored moth. Unaware of its impending capture, it flitted from flower to flower, sometimes seeming to hover in the air. Sally watched it carefully for a while, biting her lip. She was quiet. At one point, when it landed on a leaf, Sally quickly enveloped the whole leaf with the little jar, then clasped her hand on it. "I got it!" she called, unaware that Marla had been watching her.

"We should kill that one right away, because it might get out if you try to put any more in," Marla said professionally.

Sally looked at the jar. "OK," she said.

"I have some it's time to kill too," Marla said, proudly bringing forth her beetle, the cricket and the flat, spotted thing.

"OK," Sally repeated.

Sally produced the cotton balls and Marla soaked them with the strong-smelling fingernail polish remover. She opened the jars just wide enough to put two saturated balls in each. Then she slammed down the lids and turned them to lock them in.

"How does it kill them," Sally wondered.

"I don't know," Marla said. "The fumes, I guess. It's poi-

sonous. Gets in their lungs and kills them."

"Could it kill a person?"

"Maybe, if there was enough of it."

They both stared at the thick glass cages. The blue moth continued a close, frenzied flight, banging papery wings against the sides of the jar. The beetle kept crawling toward the top of the container. The cricket would jump and fall, jump and fall, ceaselessly.

"How come they're not dying?" Sally asked.

"They don't die right away," said Marla, but she too had assumed that the death would be immediate. It didn't even look as if the insects were winding down, just straining for escape, testing the clear hard limits of their containers.

Marla looked at the sky, shielding her eyes from the sun.

"Maybe we should put some more cotton balls in," suggested Sally.

"Maybe," Marla agreed. She soaked two more cotton balls and dropped them in the containers quickly.

"Bet they thought they were getting out that time," Sally said.

Marla half-doubted that they were thinking anything; they seemed driven by something, but not thought.

"Anyway, let's get some more. We're probably not even close to famous yet."

They separated again and continued their search, backs bent, shoulders burning in the afternoon sun. More beetles, some more moths, even a skillfully caught butterfly with a wingspan bigger than the diameter of the jar. They ignored the gnats, other than to wave them away from their much-bitten faces. They'd put three or four insects in a jar before reaching for another. Occasionally they'd stop to drop the lethal cotton balls into the little cells. Their hair was tangled with pieces of weeds. Once Marla stopped just to look around. She could barely see their bikes at the top of the hill. Behind them, the church seemed even larger than before, separating them from their neighborhood. She saw a few patient gray tombstones through the trees. The cars on the highway zipped by, not noticing the girls in the field. Mr. Murphy's farm and the electric fence remained unchanged.

The blue moth continued a close, frenzied flight, banging papery wings against the sides of the jar.

"Hey! Hey, Marla! What're we gonna do when we think we got a good one?"

"What d'ya mean?" Marla called back.

"One that'll get us famous. Like the ant in Australia."

"We take it to my brother's Biology teacher." Marla had already thought this through. "He'll know, probably. You think you got one?" She walked over to where Sally was standing.

"You wouldn't be afraid to ask a high school teacher?"

"Nah. Not if we could get famous. Whatcha got?"

Sally had captured a small, green stick with legs, a combination between a grasshopper and a blade of grass. Its jumps were neat and quick.

"Hunh," said Marla, impressed.

Sally grinned.

"You think it'll get us famous?"

"Nah," said Marla.

"What d'ya mean?" Sally stopped grinning. "You ever seen anything like this?"

"Of course," Marla lied. "They're all over. It's neat, though," she said softening.

"I don't think we're gonna get famous today, Marla."

"Of course you can't do it in one day," Marla muttered, trying to hide her disappointment.

"Let's just go back," Sally said, looking toward the bikes near the huge white church.

"No!" Marla said suddenly. "Let's not go home just yet."

Sally looked at her, tilting her head. "Alright," she said, sighing. She didn't move.

Marla shrugged her shoulders. She pulled another jar from the bookbag. She walked in the direction of Mr. Murphy's farm, turning again from Sally.

"Ow!" she cried suddenly as she felt a sharp, biting pain on her neck. Tears came to her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Sally came over, distressed.

"Something bit me or something . . ."

"Did you get stung by a bee?"

"I don't know . . . I've never been stung by a bee . . . It hurts..."

"You've *never* gotten stung by a bee?"

"Uh-uh."

"Not even when you were little?"

"I told you, *no*."

"Oh my God, oh my God . . . I wish my Mom was here; she'd know what to do."

"What *are* you supposed to do?"

"I don't remember. Baking soda or something? We don't have any baking soda."

"Of course we don't. Is the stinger still in? Be careful when you look."

"Oh my God, your neck is swollen! I can't tell — it's all red."

"What if I'm allergic?"

"If you're allergic?"

"If I'm allergic, and somebody doesn't do something right away, like give me a pill, I could die."

Sally started to cry, loud sloppy sobs. "My God, Marla, no you won't! You *can't* be allergic to bees! Your mother wouldn't let you come here if you were allergic to bees! You're *not* going to die!"

"How would my mother know, Sally, if I'd never been *stung* by a bee before?"

"Stop it, Marla, stop it, stop it! I would hate you if you died!" Sally's voice was almost incoherent through her sobs.

"Shut up, Sally. I'm probably not allergic."

"But you're neck's all swollen up . . . and I don't know what to do . . . don't know who to ask . . ."

"Sally, I said shut up. We'll just go home. I'm not going to die between here and home." Marla once again scanned the surroundings. "It doesn't hurt as much as it did at first. Besides, I'm not having trouble breathing. I think you have trouble breathing if you're allergic to beestings."

"Are you sure?"

"No, but I'm kind of sure."

"Do you need help getting up the hill? Are you going to be OK?"

They gathered together the killing jars filled with thick air and limp insects. All were lifeless but the newly-captured green stick, which continued to pound itself on the lid and sides of the jar. They packed them in the bags. Sally offered to carry Marla's but Marla refused, strapping it to her back. They made their way laboriously up the hill, toward their bikes by the massive white church. Marla felt weak and red as she climbed, the sun pounding relentlessly on her back; the beesting still smarting on her swollen neck.

They made it. They walked their bikes back, through the woods, across the church parking lot, through the graveyard, and even through the ditch. They looked both ways before crossing Garfield. "I think I could probably ride back from here," said Marla quietly, looking at the endless street of tiny houses.

"You sure?" Sally said. She looked dramatically at Marla. "Just as long as you're OK, Marla, that's the most important thing; just as long as you don't die," she said stupidly, blinking back tears with her moth-like worried eyelids.

Marla glared at her. "Sally, I told you to shut up!" She mounted her bike and rode off into the blur of small houses. ❖

You Don't Know the First Thing About It

Rachel Demma

I am sitting here in the dried mustardy smell of my own sweat, rubbing my knuckles on my jeans and biting the insides of my cheeks. I'm letting all of this idiocy dribble out of the backwaters of my brain. No thought is my own. No action is my own. Even my inaction is not my own. It's all not been done before. I'm a mushroom picker.

Yesterday, I saw that there is a vial of your lipstick in the bathroom cabinet. Inside there is a waxy brown stub. On the bottom the label says 'A Whole Lotta Terra Cotta.' There is a silver barrette wedged between the floor and the baseboard of the hallway outside the bedroom.

My mother is lying in a plain-walled room at St. Lukes, her eyes emptied and her body smoothed by the tightness of a hospital-made bed. Her finger tips pick at the sheets, the T.V. remote control, anything within reach for lack of a cigarette. She smokes those thin cigarettes with pastel filters. Their butts used to poke up in beds of ashes scattered through the house like spring bulbs through a frost. All the smoke turned her grey and the walls yellow. In the living room there was only one white square on the wall where she had taken her wedding picture down.

I am waiting for her to fall asleep. I have heard that the blind can sleep with their eyes open.

In a rainy summer eight years ago she drank glasses of water while standing in front of the sink letting the tap run. She ate a pan of microwave brownies in one sitting. She picked the chocolate chips out of cookies. Her ankles swelled over the tops of her feet and she carried her watch in her pocket after her wrists grew too thick. My sister Cecily woke me up one night to push me into the car and then to sit heavy-eyed in the emergency room.

I am a mushroom picker. Look it up. Here's an exact reference: Part six, chapter five in *Anna Karenina*. The details are immaterial. Just understand this. A man is in love with a woman and they are walking in the forest. At the point he knows he must ask her to marry him he cannot and instead they start to look for mushrooms to pick. The time comes and passes and nothing is done. Insecurity translates easily into inaction.

My mother and I are still sitting in silence. Her hands are still now. Cecily is downstairs in the cafeteria spooning apple sauce between her daughter's limp and resisting lips. She told me to come up and sit. My mother found Jesus and lost her son. Her diabetic brush with death was her rebirth. It's like a friend of mine said that just because you're born again, it doesn't mean you're going to live as long the second time around. My mother isn't dying, but sitting in her wasted stare in this room is my rehearsal for it. Her breathing is slowing to the tempo of sleep.

Cecily brings me to her apartment after visiting hours are over. She puts Meg down to sleep and comes back to pull the couch out for me.

"It was good to see you two talking together this morning."

"But now we've run out of things to say. I should have staggered the conversation better."

She says with her back towards me bending over to tuck in sheets, "There'll be more to say, I'm sure. Give it time."

"I'm only here until tomorrow," I tell her and she turns toward me.

"There's more time after tomorrow. At least she's trying with you."

We stand looking at

eachother from opposite sides of the bed. She is expecting agreement from me and waits with patience. I remember you liked Cecily and I am seeing the similarity between the two of you.

"Sure."

She backs away from the bed looking at me. "Sleep well. I hope Meg doesn't wake you. And sleep late. You look exhausted, Louis."

The walls are orange with light from the street. Cars' headlights circle the room. I am thinking of the way your summer callouses scrape against my shins when you move against me in bed and the slight shaking of your arm when you prop yourself up on your elbow. Opportunities that buckled under paranoia are rising up and falling back like a slide show behind my closed eyes. This crazy viewfinder on the past is not stopping and I feel I have to squint against it. This is what carelessness in the past can amount to, squinting in the dark. You sit across from me, leaning over the small table. Your neck is settled so firmly into the bones behind your collar and it is only by luck that you were seated in the sun. There is light catching onto every part of your head and sliding color all over you. But the conversation is not fitting to the scene. You are pushing your hands into the table like you are trying to rub off its surface. And there is the argument that circled us for months and finally took you under.

My mother is more talkative in the morning than she is at night. The starkness of the room is oppressive. My mother has taped a xerox copy of the Lord's Prayer over the night table. There is a talk-show on the T.V. that my mother's head turns to at each sound of applause like she wants to see the reason for it. Cecily is in the room with Meg in a stroller. They talk about her new teeth and my mother smiles and nods at each development as it is told by Cecily.

Downstairs the cafeteria is almost empty. I take my cup of coffee and walk into the lobby. There is no one here either and I stand in the doorway of the gift shop for a while looking in at the stuffed animals and flower arrangements. An old man in black pants and a white shirt looking like an off-duty waiter is moving slowly around the shop, touching things on the shelves. He reaches out to a stuffed pig, gently holding the fabric of its ear between is forefinger and thumb like he was testing its quality. He does the same to each animal within reach. He could be blind, he moves with a measured carefulness and looks at the floor. But he walks to the cash register and looks at his money to count out exact change for the flowers he chooses to buy.

We have ended up sitting across from eachother, sipping from our Styrofoam coffee cups and listening to the hospital doors slide open and closed with each push of cold air from outside. His pants are a shiny material, perfectly creased even while sitting down. He's holding the flowers he bought like he's just won a beauty pageant, against his chest with crossed arms.

"Waiting is never easy is it?" he says.

"No."

Conversations in hospitals are hard to enter into. Their fragility is discouraging. You can say the exact wrong thing without meaning to. This guy just fell into the correct opening line, actually a very good one. Everyone in hospitals is usually waiting for something, to get released, to die, to give birth. It is safe to say for them all that the waiting is never easy. But I don't ask what or who he's waiting on. He's old and it probably isn't very pretty. I see a wedding band on his left hand. He's wearing silver cuff links.

"Those flowers are nice."

"Yes." He nestles his chin into the tops of the roses and ferns. His foot is tapping back and forth, not only up and down, but side to side too. "They're for my daughter."

"Maybe I should get my mother some."

We're opening slowly to one another about our reasons to be here. I decide his daughter is lying in labor somewhere upstairs, sweatily hanging on the hand of her husband and breathing like a desperate runner who's going to finish last. Cecily did that to my mother when Meg was preparing tp be born. I stood in the hall and listened to it, too embarrassed to stay in the room. He leans for-

ward against the crackling bouquet.

"You're in for your mother?"

It sounds like I'm serving time for her. I don't know how much to get into. I'd rather hear about his reasons for being here. His foot is still jigging wildly on the carpet and the heel of the other one is now picking up a back beat. I tell him yes.

He settles back and drinks from his coffee. His upper body looks too relaxed to belong to his feet. "My daughter's having a child. She's having a hard time of it. The nurse told me to take a breather and get a cup of coffee or something." He seems proud to have followed her instructions so completely. "Lesley, her husband, he's still up there with her."

The more he talks the more tired he looks. He must work late hours at what he does in black pants and a white shirt. They're formal dress pants with a shiny strip of satin running the outer length of the leg. He sees me eyeing them.

"I just came from a wedding," he says with a throaty laugh. "That's why my daughter's got a husband up there with her now." His legs are moving all over. He's like a seven year old who can't wait for something. He crushes his empty coffee cup in his fist.

"Well," I say. His eyes are bearing into mine with so much force that I can't believe I thought he could be blind. It's an intentness that makes me want to look away but holds me from doing it. "Congratulations. On both counts."

He rasps out another laugh gleefully into the flowers. "That's right. On both counts," he repeats and then suddenly becomes still and looks down. He is remembering that he's in a hospital and sitting across from a stranger who could be one step shy of the mourning process.

My coffee is cold now, but I'm still sipping at it, wanting to stretch out the conversation

My mother isn't dying, but sitting in her wasted stare in this room is my rehearsal for it.

and the man's presence.

"Well," I say again.

This is my stock response. My mother called me herself on Thursday to tell me about the last operation. She said,"It's official. They even took away those wraparound sunglasses." I said, "Well," and then realizing how short it fell, repeated it with feeling into the phone. You walked into the apartment and told me you're leaving and started right then to pick up your clothes and books and put them in bags. I stood in the kitchen and started every protestation with "Well".

"How's it going with her," the guy asks sympathetically.

I almost start talking about you, his question fits so neatly with my thinking. But we're in the hospital and the real situation at hand is supposed to be my mother. I tell him fine and he begins a lurching speech of elderly reassurance.

"My mother wouldn't let it go in a place like this." He nods to the lobby. "She lay in her room for weeks and just kept telling us all to take her home. There were a lot of us to convince and no one knew," he leans forward to make the sign of quotation marks in the air and almost looses the flowers, "what was best." My two sisters, they were all for a nursing home and they had the money to pay for it so that was in their favor. My brother Phil was just for leaving her in the hospital until she threw in the towel." He started tapping his foot again in time to his narration. "And me." The toe flew down and back up. "I agreed with her." "My father," there is a quick flurry of movement, "he was broken down. What ended up happening is that in the middle of all our confusion she died anyway." His left foot almost rose completely off the ground. "I was the only one who wanted her home. Do you know, " and he pauses to turn the stare back on me with excitement, "that my father died a year later almost the exact day she passed?"

I make some movement with my head, almost a nod of affirmation for him. This kind of talk is risky in a hospital.

"I left it all after that. Something inside was sparked

ward against the crackling bouquet.

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"Well," I say again.

This is my stock response. My mother called me herself on Thursday to tell me about the last operation. She said,"It's official. They even took away those wraparound sunglasses." I said, "Well," and then realizing how short it fell, repeated it with feeling into the phone. You walked into the apartment and told me you're leaving and started right then to pick up your clothes and books and put them in bags. I stood in the kitchen and started every protestation with "Well".

"How's it going with her," the guy asks sympathetically.

I almost start talking about you, his question fits so neatly with my thinking. But we're in the hospital and the real situation at hand is supposed to be my mother. I tell him fine and he begins a lurching speech of elderly reassurance.

"My mother wouldn't let it go in a place like this." He nods to the lobby. "She lay in her room for weeks and just kept telling us all to take her home. There were a lot of us to convince and no one knew," he leans forward to make the sign of quotation marks in the air and almost looses the flowers, "what was best." My two sisters, they were all for a nursing home and they had the money to pay for it so that was in their favor. My brother Phil was just for leaving her in the hospital until she threw in the towel." He started tapping his foot again in time to his narration. "And me." The toe flew down and back up. "I agreed with her." "My father," there is a quick flurry of movement, "he was broken down. What ended up happening is that in the middle of all our confusion she died anyway." His left foot almost rose completely off the ground. "I was the only one who wanted her home. Do you know, " and he pauses to turn the stare back on me with excitement, "that my father died a year later almost the exact day she passed?"

I make some movement with my head, almost a nod of affirmation for him. This kind of talk is risky in a hospital.

"I left it all after that. Something inside was sparked

by their deaths. Right after the funeral I went to Georgia and eloped. Atlanta. In the summer, right in this tremendous heat wave. I paid the Justice of the Peace by check and my checkbook had all but melted together during the drive down in the car. Marriage wasn't even in the cards for me until then." He laughs and then coughs heavily into the flowers. "Time just lets things bleed into one another." He turns his head suddenly toward the front desk like he hears his name called and then turns to me again, remembering why he's here. "I hope everything will work out alright," he says with the kindness of a good friend. He stands and jauntily holds his flowers under one arm as he extends the other to shake my hand.

I'm shaking his hand and I think that his wife probably isn't here because she's already dead. He walks quickly and expectantly to the elevators, but with a stiffness that I wouldn't think he'd have. Standing in the little lit box of the elevator, he raises his hand to me with military solemnness.

I leave my mother to fly back here on Sunday. She has started shuffling down the hospital hallways trailing her fingers along the wall. Cecily takes me to the airport and standing at the departure gate suddenly realizes that we haven't really had a conversation the whole time I was up. She is hurriedly prying into classes, if any grants came through for next year- you. There is no time to really say anything at all and I get on the plane.

In the kitchen there are some of your mugs left in the cabinet. Curving renditions of Monet's Water Lillies and cutesy smart-ass little comments. Balled up in the corner of the bedroom is a grey t-shirt that still emits your springtime odor of deodorant and lotion. Congealed to the side of sink is a an orange bar of soap that is not quite fully opaque. I am hoarding these relics of you. I will be some pathetic old man who will stuff and freeze dry the corpse of his favorite spouse or dog so that she may forever sit at his table or sprawl at his feet, not necessarily in that respective order. The mushroom picker is not allowed to look backward on his misuse of time and inclination. When I sit on the sofa in the living room, I find the remote control of your V.C.R. between the cushions.

My mother is moved into a nursing home by Cecily and I write the number down on the back of receipt and then accidently throw it away. The pillow still carries the saccharin smell of your shampoo.

The man in the hospital is a checkpoint for me. Every few days I think of his daughter's new baby. It is now accustomed to its mother's voice and maybe cries and is startled by that of its father. It is moved from the hospital home to a bedroom, neutral in readiness for the baby's unknown identity. But the gender-specific footed pajamas and toys begin to be put in place. It wakes them at odd hours of the night for its feedings and these are fought over good-naturedly. The man though, is returned to his single bed-room house or apartment. He returns his rented tuxedo. His grandchild is lying on its back in crib or hanging heavy-headed against its mother's shoulder, growing and admired. And everyone is unaware that the baby came out of a woman's misplaced dying and her husband's answer to it and a man startled by death out of inaction into marriage.

You are moved back in with your mother in Vermont and I throw away the post card you sent. You ask me to send your copy of *The Colossus* with its inscription from your sister on the inside front cover. Longing can drift easily into fixation with a return address you wrote, like an afterthought, in a different color ink at the top of the post card. There are attempts to write to you, all ending in the first paragraph, lying around me in bed. The sun is dripping into the room through grooves in the venetian blinds. This is obscene in its absurdity. It is like Humphrey's eyes knawing at the adolescent curving of Lolita's calf or Gatsby transfixed by the green light on Daisy's dock. Desire perverted by obsession.

Sitting in the bar that is closest to my apartment I let whiskey sours smooth down my throat which is rough from all the smoke in the room. The bartender is wearing mascara like she wants to blot out her eyes. The lashes hang heavy and black and incongruous with

her blonde hair. There is no one in that I recognize. She shouts out last call. Next to me a man watches a couple weaving across the floor on their way out. Their laughter is buoyed up with alcohol and their movements snarled in their hilarity. The man next to me crushes his cigarette in the plastic ashtray and says to the bartender,

"Give me my tab, hon."

She slides behind the register and says, "Shit. Twenty bucks says those two don't make it home alive."

The man looks after them moving onto the sidewalk.

"No way, hon. I don't bet on death."

I look at him without turning my head. He is old and the skin on his face looks like cracking plaster. Don't gamble with death, it bleeds into life, like the one at the hospital said. You would like to hear these profundities coming out old mens' mouths. You would laugh at them and at me for my absorption in them. I will be like this. Waiting in hospitals for my mother to die and for people to be born and sitting in bars with a creased neck and skin that is tired of stretching over my face. Letting all of it carry me forward deeper into the forest with my head down, looking for the white caps of mushrooms against the ground. You will be less remembered as I bend down to each new sighting. The old man is looking at me. I let my stare fall down to his hands on the bar and they have veins that rise up like blue bridges to link his bones. ❖

Don't gamble with death, it bleeds into life . . .

Getting Settled

Sarah Duffy

It started with notes on the refrigerator just a few days after she had moved in. Personal reminders of things to do and buy. *CALL DAD, NEED LIGHT BULBS*, on square, yellow slips of paper with sticky backs, from a pad she had left over from college. She didn't really need reminders, and once she had done what the notes told her to do, she wouldn't take the old slips down or throw any away. She wanted them to accumulate. Notes on the refrigerator, gave her new apartment a more lived-in look, she thought. All happy, comfortable households had important papers magnetized conveniently to their Kenmores and Frigidairs. Electric bills, phone lists, homemade cards from the kids, the dates of all of Billy's soccer games and Sally's scout meetings. Her father had never allowed anything as untidy as this to go on in their house. He was an orderly man. Everything put away and presentable, nothing personal lying around for just any one to see. Even his bedroom he kept bare and impersonal. No deodorant left on the dresser or drawers left open to reveal rows of socks and underwear. He kept the bed always made and the trashcan next to his immaculate closet, always empty. Every room in the house looked like a display window in a furniture store.

She wrote *MAGNETS* on a square and put it right in the middle of the top freezer section, partially covering the call dad note. With magnets, she would be able to put up larger things. Magazine articles about eating right and exercising tips, garden improvement, book and movie reviews, maybe a few postcard prints of famous art work. She would get the hard plastic kind of magnets her grandmother used, the one's that came shaped as food. Her father thought them particularly tacky, even telling grandma so and urging grandpa to do something about it. He felt women needed constant guidance, even ones as old as grandma. It's a man's place, they're just like children, he always said.

She went to the grocery store the next day, and found whole packages of them costing much less money than she had expected. *Good thing, considering the way women handle money, huh, Dad?* Within days they were all in use. Bright green broccoli, pale yellow corn-on-the-cob, bananas with small, square brown tips, bunches of grapes, and New York City apples with one bite taken out of the side of each to show the smooth white inside; all holding up newspaper articles about foreign policy, the economy and the rising cost of living, government spending, unemployment; anything and everything that women weren't supposed to concern themselves with. No stupid art prints after all. When she really thought about it, she realized she had had enough of art in college; enough in fact for an Art History degree . A useless degree chosen by her father because he thought that was the only major left *appropriate* for women. A modern equivalent of the old "how to be lady and make good conversation" majors, and now she couldn't get a job, but then she wasn't supposed to get a degree to get a job, was she? *Should have been married after graduation and well on the way to a first child by now, right Daddy?*

All in all, she liked the way her new apartment was looking. It was anti-dad style. She had dozens of more articles she wanted to put up. Divorce, rising crime rate, the homeless; bold headlines you couldn't ignore, but there was no more room on the refrigerator, so she moved onto the cabinets and

doors. An article for each one. Pages of disease and destruction waving up at you with the slightest breeze. Waving up, *Hi, Daddy*. And the kitchen was only the beginning. There were two other rooms in the apartment, and much empty wall space to work with.

The bathroom would be done barroom style! A black permanent marker in her hand, and she was a poet. Every obscenity and profanity, as a proper lady, she was never supposed to have used or heard, put together nicely to form vividly descriptive lines of verse that ran ceiling to floor, coupled throughout with carefully placed arrows all pointing to the toilet to add just the right touch; show exactly what she meant. *What do you think about that, Daddy?* She remembered the time when she was seven and her father had caught her and her best friend Susan, while playing in her backyard, singing a rhyme they had learned in school. Eyes bulging, face red, and forehead sweating, he pulled Susan up by the back of he neck, calling them filthy mouthed brats, and drug her crying around the side of the house to the front where he screamed at her to go home and never come back. *To hear those words come out of a girls mouth, let alone my own daughter . . . Is that the way I raised you . . . You're lucky your mother is not alive to see you now*, and she was never allowed to play with Susan again. *Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, chasing all the girls with his big fat . . .*

But it was in the bedroom that she really became inspired. Life-size marker outlines of women and men having sex. An orgy for each wall, and to top it all off, an awe-inspiring list of all the men she had slept with in college, on the wall at the head of her bed. John Wilmer, Jody Brown, Ben Tramble, Andy Morrison, and all the rest, a list to make anyone proud. At the top, Tim Meyers, who had worn expensive suits everyday, reminding her of her father. She had liked the way he seemed to have everything under control and in order. She had thought they would eventually be married, but he said he wanted a women more in touch with the world, a little less sheltered and old-fashioned. She had seen his picture in the newspaper, just a few days before, next to a pretty little business major named Ann that she recognized from her graduating class. They were announcing their engagement. At first she laughed at the irony of it; business had been what she had wanted to go into ever since high school, but after a while, she couldn't stop thinking about it. She got angrier and angrier as she ran her fingers over his name on the wall, first slowly and then faster and faster, trying to smear away the marker, but it had dried and was permanent. *Fuck you, Daddy.*

Eyes bulging, face red, and forehead sweating, he pulled Susan up by the back of the neck . . .

Exhausted, her fingers raw from rubbing, she stood in the middle of her finished and ruined apartment, being offended by the words and twisted bodies surrounding her, being embarrassed by the names above her bed, thinking about all the newspaper articles taped everywhere, the notes on the refrigerator, and knowing she still had to call Daddy. ❖

Evolution

Mindie Kaplan

When Mother shed the first time, it wasn't in a single, smooth curving piece of milky white skin. She harshly scraped it free, ripping it into jagged shreds, not caring if this thing she was discarding from her body disintegrated into a thousand salty stripped tatters. But she said it felt better when it was over and I appeared alongside her fresh beauty with the marks still laying my soul bare. My newly formed eyes blinked wetly from the negative places in the skin once hers, now mine, but I still see things the way she did -sometimes.

Sometimes, as if she hadn't quite realized the shredding was over, she itched at the skin lying prostrate, naked limbs flung outward. It only grew more rigid under her ministration, thick and unresponsive, until now when she seldom bothers to touch the flaked skin anymore. That's where the thickened places along the belly and cheek come from— the skin growing tough and impenetrable.

I never told this to Matthew. Not even to explain why he couldn't really touch me though he lay beside me each night. He understood he claimed, of course he would be gentle and understanding. He'd wait, he told me. Patiently encourage the healing until I could let him inside. Forever, he'd whisper as he tried to quiet my protests. But the waiting turned to anger, then to fear. Matthew was angry when he couldn't taste beneath the skin, couldn't reach behind my teeth to give me life. He couldn't fill me— and only his innocent foolishness was willing to try. He wanted to blow me up like a rubber doll and animate these outflung limbs that he arranged skillfully around his neck and shoulders to look as if I really were holding him. Maybe he even thought they were, but for him I remained the Corpse, the discarded skin scoured from my mother's belly. "We're not the same," the voice said dully, it rang in my own ears even as I spoke it— and we weren't. His skin was fragile, hollow— transparent enough that I knew where he went every third Wednesday at four o'clock so the snakes wouldn't swallow his fear whole. That was the time my friends and I would curl into the silk sheets to feed. The snakes, beloved companions, fed off my pain as the slid between my lips— expanding me with their movements in ways that Matthew couldn't imagine.

. . . for him I remained the Corpse, the discarded skin scoured from my mother's belly.

He couldn't know, but mercifully he did nothing, just flung his limbs off the bed, grabbing bits of clothing so he could dress elsewhere. We couldn't have hoped otherwise, Matthew and I, but somehow it made one of us less than we were. I opened my mouth wider to my pets— just in case the lesser one was me. They pulsed life in and out of my lips, pressing against the bone of my teeth to wrap themselves around my breasts. Finally, we slept.

I could have shown him the thickened places, but that wouldn't have explained why he and I were different. Why I curled up into the pillows of the window seat in the height of the afternoon to linger in the sun and think of Mother. Why I

welcomed the black wrigglers against my mouth each night as he cowered against the bedpost. Because we were the same, my darlings and I. And they understood why I've always kept that secret.

The black wrigglers shed last night, pressing against the rough edges of our bed. The thinly parted black scaled . . . remnants . . . seemed gray in the dim light. I watched them, turning in sinuous and sensual circles, back towards that mimicry of themselves lying in rough pieces on the sheets. Maws opened widely as they pressed the skin inward, jealousy snatching it from the world. Compelled; it was the thing lying dead against the mattress even as I lay pliable but not yet responding to the ministrations which give me life.

My eyes closed as my finger reached up to touch my pale lips. My hands slid downward over the line of chin and neck to wrap themselves around my shoulder and back, holding tightly to the skin. I smiled and cried with joy as I basked in the proof of my mother's love. ❖

I watched them, turning in sinuous and sensual circles, back towards that mimicry of themselves lying in rough pieces on the sheets.

The Skinny Dipper

Mark Murphy

It actually takes quite an effort to remember, but I will certainly try. You probably think I'm crazy considering how you found me. I'm sure it's not everyday you find naked men on the bottom of the recreation center pool. Except for this head set, goggles, and a pair of aqua socks that is. The night before you found me is very cloudy, but I do have some idea of what I was doing. I'm not crazy. Let me tell you how this all began.

I started skinny dipping because I hate Sundays. I am usually glad to sit around the house with Claira, but not on Sundays. Claira is my cat and she's been my cat for over five years. I love her as deeply as a man can love a his cat. I spend a ridiculous amount of time with her or that is what my friends tell me. She is a beautiful Persian and she is also perfect company six days of the week.

On Sundays, however when I feel lonelier and emptier than I care to admit, I like to do something a little different. I swim laps in my pool with nothing on. I realize there are probably many people who do this all the time. I've even heard of wild parties less than a mile from my home where a whole lot of naked people get together to swim and be merry. I do not swim to be merry. Not do I swim to stay in shape. I swim to stay sane. I feel like I'm going crazy sitting around my house, but when I'm getting crazy in the pool I feel like a little kid. There are also times when I feel like I'm moving through my life with no more comprehension than a naked swimmer, however when I am in my pool on Sundays, I am not a naked swimmer, I am a skinny dipper.

The problem was that I had been skinny dipping for almost the whole summer. I use to do it for half an hour, but by the beginning of August I could skinny dip for two hours without getting terribly tired. One Sunday I skinny dipped for over three hours. Of course I wasn't doing free style the whole time. I was treading water a lot, but I was still surprised that I could pull it off. I'd evidently gotten a little stronger. If I had tried to swim for three hours straight back in June I would have ended up on the bottom of the pool. I could see that my arms and legs had gotten firmer and my stomach had flattened. I mean it wasn't a flat stomach, but it wasn't quite the inner tube it used to be.

Something else happens though. After you've been in the pool for over an hour, naked or not, you're not skinny dipping. You're swimming and you know it. Your legs don't want to kick anymore, and the water around your arms feels warm and thick. Your goggles quit working along time ago so your eyes are burning. That feeling you got when your naked body hit the water is only a memory as you fight through the disgusting fluid. Your strokes are no longer smooth and constant. You don't move with the water; you kick and slap and beat it until you get to the wall, You don't bounce off the wall, you fold up your legs as much as you can so the push will give your arms a break. You lift one arm up over the water and start stroking. You do this over and over again. I did it for more than three hours that Sunday.

You don't just forget that your naked. You forget to kick, to come up for air, and if you're not careful, you'll forget that the wall is there. You'll forget

how many laps you've swum and when you started. I think the only reason I skinny-dipped that long was because I forgot to quit.

That was the night I begam drawing up my plans. I wish I could say it came to me in a dream, but that night was like so many other in which I can't sleep. When I don't sleep, I don't dream and them I try to find something on the radio. I flip through all my albums. I look over my entire bookshelf. I always end up hitting those two stations that are still on late. I do this a lot.

After trying all my usual options I was in the kitchen eating a banana and I realized that this Sunday was even longer than the usual Sunday. I figured since I wasn't sleeping I should try something I enjoyed. So I took off my pajamas, went outside, and dived into the pool. After just a few laps I got out and thought about what I was doing and how senseless it was. I tried to estimate how many times I'd lapped that damn pool. I wondered about how many miles I had skinny dipped. I started feeling worse and worse so I headed back inside.

I went into the utility room and grabbed a towel so I could dry off. I then wrapped the towel around my waist and sat down at the kitchen table. I grabbed a pencil and paper and wrote *The Claira River* on top of the page. I had barely gotten started drawing this river when I felt her at my feet. I love that. I can't sit down at my house without her snuggling up next to my feet. I don't know how many nights I've come in, plopped my aching corpse down on the couch, and waited for that rush of wonder feline life. It moves up through my ankles, my pine prickling legs, and warms my heart. No other cat has this effect on me.

The Claira River starts in my pool. It ends almost a mile away at the neighborhood recreation center. After doing the length of my pool, I jump the fence, hit the Anderson's pool three houses down, and so flows the Claira River. I had no idea so many people had pools in my subdivision before I mapped this thing out.

I started skinny dipping because I hate Sundays.

This lap pool was already in my backyard when I bought this house. It's sort of a pain in the ass to keep clean, too. It really makes no sense to me that there are so many pools in my neighborhood. I guess I though it was bout time they were all unified in the brand new magnificent form of the Claira River. Thinking back on it, maybe drawing up this river was where I should have stopped, but the skinny dipper skinny dips.

The next week I trained. I swam at least an hour every night, and when it got dark enough I practiced hopping the fence. First in my sweat pants, then in shorts, and finally in the nude. It's not easy either. I thought about wearing some shorts or something and taking them off when I got to each of the pools, but that wasn't how the Claira River was to be traveled. I bought some of those aqua socks to give me some traction climbing fences and crossing streets, but my genitals were left to swing across fence posts and dangle in the sweet river water.

I guess I left some time after midnight. I remember the first two pools. I nearly straddled that second fence - the Anderson's. Then I remember skinny dipping one pool particularly fast, having seen two children's silhouettes glued to a glass door. I remember starting to cross the street once, and diving behind a bush as a car passed. I don't remember seeing any other cars. It seems like I would remember climbing over the fence of the recreation center pool, but I have no recollection of that final triumphant length. How strange it is that what you want to remember most is precisely what you cannot remember!

I can't remember that because of this concussion I received against the wall of the recreation center pool. I imag-

ine I was sprinting out the length of the pool and didn't realize how near the end I was. Thank God the neighborhood swim team practice started twenty minutes later at 5 a.m. Thank God Alex Walker knew CPR and could drag me out of that pool and administer it to me. I couldn't have done that when I was fourteen, and I told him that in the letter I wrote him. I wrote him a Thank-you letter. What else am I supposed to do? ❖

How strange it is that what you want to remember most is precisely what you cannot . . .

Camera-Shy

Mark Phaneuf

Time stood still in my cramped dorm room as I waited for the response. I had just said I didn't really remember who the girl in the picture was. This was a lie. Just a little white lie; no harm, no foul. For all that went through my head, however, I might as well have been up for the electric chair. It had been about two years since I last spoke to Mary Salem, and I was still lying about her.

Remembering her was nothing new. My memory is crackerjack and I have a hard time forgetting things. When I say "I don't remember," what I mean is I don't want to get into it. People who know me usually recognize this tactic and often call my bluff. Then I have to say flat out that I don't want to talk about it. On those few occasions when I truly cannot recall some particular incident, my close friends will not believe me. People who don't know me well say they understand how I can forget things, and invariably make an allusion to something they forgot at some moment in time - a habit I find incredibly annoying.

This is because, not only am I in possession of an excellent memory, but I think people usually know when I'm not telling the truth. On occasions when someone agrees with my lie and actively elaborates on it, I am never sure how to take it. I wonder if the person is aware of my lie and playing along only to expose me later as an untrustworthy individual. Or on the other hand, is the person incapable of seeing my deceit, and thereby a gullible fool who I could further exploit to my own selfish ends? Somebody is always getting screwed by someone.

The question concerning the aforementioned Mary Salem was posed to me by another girl. Her name was Judy. We were sitting on my bed, looking through my high school yearbook, which rested on my crotch along with Judy's right hand. Judy— I honestly don't remember her last name—was a year ahead of me, credit-wise. I couldn't say she impressed me as being more mature, but at her age it's all the same.

Judy liked me a lot. I had no explanation for this. As often as it works out at college, and in the world in general I suppose, I wasn't all that interested in Judy. At best, my feelings were ambivalent. I did not wish her bodily harm or contagious diseases, but whatever was there for her was not there for me.

Nevertheless, she was a warm female body with all those warm female working parts. Judy's face was okay, nothing spectacular, but her body merited recognition. Very fit, very athletic, very nice breasts. She had no fat on her legs, like a lot of the girls were starting to get. She did aerobics a lot and said she was blessed that no matter how much she ate, she could not gain weight. I was glad to have her there on my bed, and actually considered myself somewhat blessed. ButI wanted it all. I wanted an incredible face to go with that body; I wanted that covalent bond. It's been quite a while since I didn't want it all.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," July said. "Sometimes, my highschool days are such a blur. Hell, some days these college ones are a blur too!" Judy amused herself with her joke and giggled. "Last time I was home, I ran into this guy who I used to borrow chem notes from every morning. He came up to me in Tower Records and said hi. I thought he was some jerk hitting on me. I completely forgot who the poor guy was. He was kind of a nerd in high school, I guess, but I felt so awful when I couldn't remember his name. It is flattering though

that he had remembered me, y'know what I mean?"

After remembering the pictures she showed me of her in a cheerleading outfit, my first thought was that every guy probably remembered her. This poor dude probably got a hard-on every time she asked for notes - hoping she would ask for something else. My second thought was whether or not she knew I had lied.

I was inclined to believe she was unaware of any dishonesty on my part. In the few months I had known her she had never demonstrated anything remotely close to a suspicious nature. I sincerely found it refreshing to see someone so incapable of anything false. She'd make someone a great girlfriend or wife someday, but not me.

The picture that sparked the question concerning Miss Salem, or perhaps by now Mrs. Salem, was of us leaning up against a car in the parking lot behind Saint Paul's; the only Kodak moment we shared. It was one of those days when a kid from the yearbook staff went around trying to take candids of the seniors, but the shots invariably ended up looking posed and cheesy. It was Mary's car, a red Datsun Sentra, before they were called Nissan. SZC-870 was the license plate number and everyone always called it "The Shyster" for some unkown reason. There was a sticker on the back bumper from the school where her older brother went. His name was Mark and he was an Environmental Studies major at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland, class of '86. One summer he had worked at a nature park out in Minnesota. I told you I have a hard time forgetting things.

The person who took the picture was a sophmore girl, named Shelia Prine, with dyed black hair and a nose ring. It's not just because of my memory that I remember that girl so vividly; she was a real character. She thought she was rebelling against something, so she smoked a lot, copped an attitude a lot, acted in a few school plays, and waxed suicidal. She envisioned herself as some damned struggling, tortured artist who wanted us to pity her poor, miserable self.

It was during these glory days that this Prine girl punched a popular girl named Gwen Everett, not unlike Judy, right in the face. Sheila claimed Gwen was an airhead bimbo bitch. I couldn't argue with that, but then somebody told me the real reason for the fight was that Gwen Everett had hooked up with this pretentious guy, Charles Murphy, who thought he was the next Byron or Brando. He played guitar, wrote poetry and wore his hair down over his eyes - the idol for all underclass chicks dressed in black. His overwrought free verse made the young girls swoon. Sheila Prine never seemed appealing to me after that.

Anyway, Mary was going to give me a ride home, for some reason or another. I didn't have a car in college and Mike Hamilton would usually give me a ride home, but he had a meeting with his Social Studies teacher and I didn't feel like waiting around for him. It was a good opportunity for me to spend some time with Mary. We had been out on a pseudo-date with a bunch of friends and I was really starting to like her.

As we were getting into her car, Sheila Prine came up to us with a camera. She told us that she was taking pictures for the yearbook and, according to her own high artistic standards, she only took pictures in black and white. I was excited to have my picture taken with Mary, thinking I would be immortalized by her side. There would be something for me to always remember, her, us, and all that. We could show the photo to our grandkids. Of course, I masked these giddy emotions behind a sheen of irony and cynicism, joking about how my hair looked. Mary was glad to pose and wanted to make sure her car got in the picture. In a few seconds Sheila Prine moved onto her next artistic arrangement, but the damage was done.

Judy OnMyBed, so-so face and all, would beat out Mary in a beauty pageant, hands down and breasts taped up. That is not an insult to Mary Salem. Conversely, it is high praise. What I mean to say is that Mary was much more than a fine rack and ass. She was probably one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, radiating an unconventional character. Put simply, her hair

wasn't blond, nor was it bleached or dyed. She had kept her natural color, a rarity at my school. She seemed like a strong-willed person, not a passive little ragdoll with her hand in my lap. Her's was an inner strength, but she wasn't butch or anything like that. I suppose her qualities were terribly subtle. Mary Salem had a mind and used it; and not in a pretentious way, like Shelia Prine.

I have thought about every particular of Mary Salem a great deal; her southern tinged accent and the way she said her As and Rs is still fresh in my mind. She wasn't the only girl I've thought about. Just the most recent. Judy's the exception to the trend and I don't fear this happening with her; the only time she crosses my mind is when she has to. Right now, however, she seems content to flip through my yearbook, with her free hand, and I'm content to let her, while I mark the time.

There were other pictures of Mary in the yearbook, but the "shyster" shot was the only one of us together, which now suits me fine. There was a period of time when all I wanted was to be by her side forever. We talked on the phone for hours, talking about nothing. Her phone number is still carved in my mind, two years after it had any pratical purpose to me.

I still get sentimental over those times, which lasted for about a month. Even though the school was not that big, after the last phone call, I never so much as said hi to the girl. And here I am dwelling on Mary Salem, while I should be drilling Judy. Teenage obsessions can prove to be quite inconveinent as you get older and, hopefully, wiser. I think I'm learning though.

"Craig, what're you thinking about? It looks like you're out in space," Judy said to me and snapped me back to the present.

"Sorry, I was thinking about that picture you asked me about. You know, that girl. For the life of me, I can't remember how I knew her. You're right, it is so strange how you can go to school with someone for so many years, and then you forget who they are," I said, looking her straight in the eye.

Even though I wasn't lying entirely, every word I said was a stab at Judy's open and unsuspecting heart. Perhaps if I kept telling myself I was never infatuated with Mary Salem, if I said enough times that I didn't know the name of the girl standing next to me in the picture, somehow it might actually be the case.

She removed her hand from my lap to look at her watch. "I gotta get back to my room, I'm meeting Kerry and the girls for dinner. D'you want to come?" she asked me as I put her shoes back on. This was a little flirtatious ritual I began when we first started dating but it quickly lost any type of excitement or arousal factor once I got to know her.

"No, I'm not real hungry right now. I think I might take a nap. When Frank gets back from practice, I'll see if he wants to get a pizza or something."

"Okay, well it was neat seeing what you looked like in highschool. Want me to put it back in your desk?" She fixed herself in the mirror, tucking her shirt back in; she did have a cute rear-end, for what it is worth.

She thought she was rebelling against something, so she smoked a lot, copped an attitude a lot, acted in a few school plays, and waxed suicidal. She envisioned herself as some damned struggling, tortured artist who wanted us to pity her poor, miserable self.

"No," I said and took the book. "I think I'm going to look at it some more. Remember all those carefree days," I said with a wistful smile.

"Oh, you're too young to be

living in the past. College is great." She kissed me. I just kind of sat there and took it, letting her do the work. I'd be kidding myself if I said it didn't feel good. But I'd also be kidding if I didn't wonder what Mary Salem tasted like.
"You're going to that thing tonight aren't you?"

"The one in town, you bet."

"I was afraid you were going to try to bury yourself in work again."

"Not tonight. There's going to be a couple of kegs there. Starts at ten, right?"

"I think so. See, you didn't get to go to fraternity parties when you were in highschool. I'm glad you'll be there. I think I'm going to get really drunk tonight. Say hi to Frank for me." She left, but I would be seeing her later. At least I knew I'd have someone to spend the night with. And I wouldn't have to stay up the whole night with all the other the lonely guys, playing drinking games and watching pornos.

When Judy was gone and I was alone in the room, I felt totally deflated and limp. I sat there, on my bed, with the yearbook closed, thinking about Mary Salem. I opened the back up to look at her picture. She wasn't dressed up, but she looked beautiful wearing a really big sweater and jeans. For some reason I felt disgusted when I thought about Judy. The two girls could not compare in my mind. Mary and I were never that physically close, the opposite of me and Judy. We'll be rolling around naked in a few hours, whereas I kissed Mary once. Hard to believe, isn't it. All the time wasted thinking about a girl and I never even got close to getting in her pants.

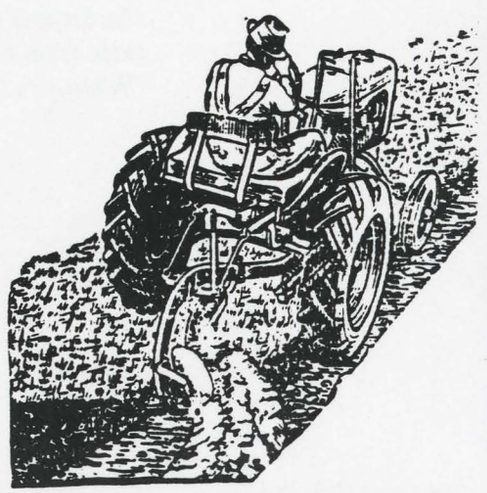
I don't know if Mary Salem liked me or if she ever gave me a second thought. I found out, after our last phone call, that she had gone back to sleeping with the guy she was seeing before me.

There are times when I think that I must have been a minor diversion, at least. At other times I curse myself for not being more forward with her, something I have no problem with now, when my mind is numbed from alcohol. Maybe if I had made some sort of move we could have had great sex and somehow stayed together forever. Then there are times like these. Times when I hate her for haunting me, for making such a lasting impression on me. She twists my mind into thinking there is something wrong with Judy. Two years have passed, and I still lose my appetite when I see my highschool yearbook.

I've catalouged, on many a night, the emotions Mary stirs up in me. Good ones like love and beauty and other ideals. Mostly bad ones though, they come easier to me; things like bitterness, resentment, obsession, and perhaps hate. I'm haunted by a girl I knew for a month. It's crazy. I can't remember anything half as crazy as this.

Anyway, last week I was over at Judy's room, one of her friends had a camera, and was taking pictures. They begged me to pose with Judy, but I wouldn't. I made a joke about being afraid of cameras because they steal your soul and everybody laughed and nobody knew anything. Judy never really bothered me about it, which also is good. I tried to console myself in knowing that, in the future, when Judy's presence isn't felt lying between my legs, there won't be any reminders of this time in my life. ❖

Poetry



Poetry

Tanya Angell Allen

PROFESSOR LAMOND TRIES TO TEACH "A VALEDICTION FORBIDDING MOURNING"
TO HIS FRESHMAN COMMON SEMINAR

The class turns electric, sensing rain. On the professor's palm light rests. He asks for thoughts on air-thin gold. Students stare. Some twitch. Women with delicate ears write letters to far-away boys. Outside bursts into rain and one man puts his head down, remembering the skylight above his bed is open.

"Sweet dreams!"

Students scatter like birds.

We Are Born To Take

We are born to take, and we must grow
to give. Lover, listen. White moths
are bashing at lights in your room. Their scent
is more bitter than any you've known.

Am I the first woman you have known?
We are born to take, and we must grow
to give. There's something about a warm, gray sky
that promises rain. Touch it, it changes.
Everything's just. We touched to be touched, listen

So we may speak. Lover, leave your moths
and join me by the lake.
Rain gives us rhythm. Grow.

Tomatoes

People
used to be afraid
of tomatoes.

In 1820 a man
swore he'd change
all this and so he sat
on Salem's courthouse steps,
two tomatoes in his hands

"I'm going to eat them"

A crowd gathered.
"Don't do it!"
"Don't do it!"

But he did.

Flower Picking Not Permitted At The Psychiatric Hospital

It's the anniversary of the August I was told
"Don't pick the laurel"—fat flowers, bold.
They sat on bushes outside the doctor's doors.
A light-giving angel —that's who they were for,
for sickness, for health, to have and to hold.

I was just barely seventeen years old.
The winds in my mind kept me shivering, cold
rubbing my wrist-cuts —though mending, still sore.

I couldn't pick laurel. They'd been sold
to the angel I thought I'd never behold.
She dressed in white; the flowers she wore
came from outside the doctor's door.
"When you leave she'll throw them to you," I was told . . .

Katie Degentesh

What Feet Do

I like the noise that boots make stuck in mud:
that quick sinkhole *suck!* And then the pud-

dle-thud of splashing after-rain, on heels
heavy with wet and washing, feels

like rivers' pull. I like the thought of worms' legs
drowning somewhere in the ground; I like my legs

to walk across where someone else has drowned.
The panic-flight of flutter-birds from ground

back to black bushes; the warning wings on sky
that say *You've tread too close to nests*; why

the world's soaked full and now oozes out whole
from each foot's shape of displaced grass, in holes

made by my walking: these things I like to know.
They're told me by the touch of earth to toe.

Rachael Fink

through my eyes

and i rose to go after him
out the door past
summer wilted flowers
in window boxes painted green like the shutters
on a white house where the victrola's in the music room
and the ceiling of the verandah is sky blue,
and hand picked tomatoes,
nestled in between sweet corn and snap beans
under a corrugated awning on the side of the highway,
ripening to the thought that the seduction
of dinner does not last the entire night,
then back in my bedroom i undress
in front of the giant redwood chest
like those found at fleamarkets where children
sell grandma's life
chair by spindly chair
its old spider-cracked mirror looking down at me
looking through his eyes

it moved
to "m"

you say you saw it sway
under the black sky
of summer thunderstorms
raindrops, dark prisms
pool in the soft curves
of leaves and fall to shatter
in the litter of discarded green
you say you saw it dance
to kettle drum echoes
of an angry god
slivers of electricity shoot
through soot colored cotton
exposing tortuous branches
with indifferent light
you say you saw
"it moved"

Thane Glenn

Ithaca

Glimpses of sun on the window frame
Soft swaying shadowing of leaves,
A shifting sandy dazzle of fish
A moment, and gone.
And on a warm day in February
I have heard the scarce sweet yearning
Meadowlark, beckoning, lazy low trill thrill
Beckoning, breathing yesterday's tomorrow, beckoning

Glimpses of quick flitting thrush through sky scattered tree-tops
Rushing all blue, collapsing in green, unfolding full day-
The wedding white breath of morning dogwood
Turned to afternoon
Hardly had it stirred quiet curtains,
And before the screen door slam
The short bright lingering scent of dandelion
Is folded into evening
In never caught understanding
Though you rub your nose yellow
For the memory

Glimpses of dew burnished seas of clover,
And in some cool past of a daydream
I remembered a place we've never been.
Not for conquest, my friends, did we come
But for this shimmering remembrance.
Ithaca
Near and distant as faery grass gold fading,
In this swelling drifting afternoon,
I long for you

After Commencement

Sun ripened hallways
Laugh incessantly,

Subside to quiet
Scrub cinder graphite,
Haul away trash bags,
Sweep barefoot grass stains.

Mark Murphy

So-so Susan

She does not have eyes like diamonds
She does not have legs forever
She does not have skin like satin

She will not turn the heads of others
She will not impress my parents
She will not satisfy my desire

She is not the girl of my dreams
She is not the one I've been waiting for
She is not someone I can do without

A Fantasy

Two Children on bicycles;
their noses red from the cold wind
and their legs growing tired
with all the miles behind them.

A boy and girl whose parents
have no idea where they are
and whose friends can never catch up:
they just watch and wonder.

A couple of kids who have started
a club with only two members
and have made a secret entry test
that no one besides themselves can pass.

Heather Pilar

Sonnet of the Artist

Pendent on a twisted wire
In the sharp, shining scraps,
We spin, trip the gyre,
We hold the masque.

We dance, whirling near and apart
Flash silver in the night
Embody art,
Dizzy, disguised, we reflect the light.

Turning, unwieldy, a tangled mobile,
Hung above the common and blind,
Battered, tainted, living steel,
The light caught, sublime.

But we struggle to untangle, loose the molded rods,
We have been the creation, we want to be the gods.

Jennifer Gray Reddish

The Tiger Still Burns

I was on the docks kicking scrap metal
When this guy began giving me this stare
Like a tiger biding time in the bush.

I kept cool—hooked each thumb through a beltloop.
But the orange clouds turned, and the sky seemed burnt—
The man transformed into his stare—a tiger .

First, his muscles seemed to want to burst through
His skin. He fell—and then walked on all fours.
Red-orange fur sprung from his scalp with each roar,

And my cool began to slip down like ice
Melting on the kitchen counter. I ran—
I thought I would call the National Guard.

But the tiger caught me by the ankle—
And the sky hailed blades of ice, granite stars.

Getting the Message Across

The challenge comes as one drop kicks the cat
Out the window to that haven
On the winter-cracked concrete. It'd be easier to prepare
Feline domesticus catchitorie. But

Nothing compares to that stomach lift joy—
Watching a sleek black cat flipping
Tail over head, head over tail.
Meowing through the light-split sky,

Flicking a hiss at the sun. The left paw
Bats at visions of morning aubades outside
My window. I'm here reading , bored. I think:
I could create a shooting star-cat to land on your house,

Your mouth—the shape of an open barn
As slick fur lands in tufts around your feet.

Why the Front Hall Door Is Off-Center
(A Vilanelle for the Working Man)

Of course I know my door was left ill-planed
At precarious angles, like some house pitched
Through a storm. I notice when people crane

Their necks and eyes, staring at the door pane
To figure out what's wrong. They check the hinges
But they always stop, thinking "I'm insane"—

Like my senile Aunt Flo who complains, bangs
Her cane, hounding me to get it fixed.
But I think of the workman sweating at the plane

Trying to get the wood straight, but leaving it plain
Crooked. He changes clothes, and then drives straight
Home to fix himself a bourbon, feigning

A headache when his wife asks about the day.
He drinks to forget he ruined my moulding—
And made odd angles in my front doorway.

The precarious slants used to plague
My mind. One time I kicked the bottom hinge—
It fell with a clack, scraping the wood-frame.
And I realized some doors are better left ill-planed.

Paul Smail

Radnor Line

Oxblood leaves trace dark spires
Slip in crimson Autumn fire
Bald bereft charred trunks, now gray and molded,
Liké cauldrons, witches' eyes.

Trees shimmering black with sparrows
My steps mock if twigs narrow
The cornfield path where my young cousins walked,
Old stalks, gentle furrows.

The noon-high sun looks on proud
His son's shack tumble-down
Its empty panes, sides agape will refuse
To renew ancient mounds.

These disused rails ran tight near
Those heaps, though swallowed for years.
I stumble along a ballasted mile
A smile, a rumbling nears.

J. Tarin Towers

Baptism: Drowning the Child

Let us tilt the coffers till the money runs aground.

The child, let's have him. Raise his yowling
Baldness over your head with fingers spread
Like a challis. *The body of Christ. Break*
The bread. Drop his head into the basin
And hold it there. He cannot scream
Under water. Rid him of original sin. Cleanse
Him in holy water. Free him of breath.
Death sends him to heaven. We'll follow him there.

I Do Not Mourn the Dead

I cannot remember his voice.
Only his silence. He rarely spoke—
Or I rarely heard him.
Yes, and he
Sat in the back row at concerts
And movies, he loved art
But never smiled or laughed.
Or I never heard him.
He exists
Now on paper, sheet music printed
In a minor key. He loved his friends
And took them with him.

Quickly. Quietly. I cannot see them.

Erika Wilson

Jack Martin Wilson

the family name for men
for my father
for his father
who died yellow
from good cellar liquor,

was not given
to my brother/half
born twenty years after
I was named a German girl:

for Jack loves
blue-eyed children,
and half-breeds
taste like chicken.

Reception

She embraced me;
pressed me between
her jelly breasts and arms.
I turned my face into her shoulder
and could smell
in the folds of her dress
loaves of fresh bread and tangy fish
from the kitchen
where the women bumped
their sweat cakes together
and rolled in their palms
Kleenex retrieved from their sleeves.

She released me, held me out
and threw her head back in laughter.

You—So Tired

Second story blew.
Skylight: no light
sheeting navy blue.

Overcoat thrown over mail,
brief case, bent arm,
rising from the stairwell.

Me, white and warm
arched away
from Gray thunderstorm.

Joy T. Yarusi

Roots and Things

Outside Paula's house there is a garden hiding
back behind the fence where the finches meet. Rhubarb
grows beside the sprouting squash and the wild flowers are real.
Every bit of green has its own perfect place
and all the colors blow together
like some paintings I have seen in all the silent galleries
I know she has never been.
Each afternoon about the time kids run home from school,
you can find her there alone
with all the smells of soils and herbs,
the sounds of breezes and birds
and you will see her kneeling next to tigerlillies,
surrounded by things with roots
and she will be waiting
wishing the approaching dusk would bring me to her soon;
I know this still,
just as I know it will be my place to kneel
one day too.

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